

## Betty McCollum

1954–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM MINNESOTA

2001–



Image courtesy of the Member

**A FORMER TEACHER AND RETAIL SALES MANAGER,** Betty McCollum entered public life as a city council member, later moving into state politics and eventually the U.S. House of Representatives. In 2001, McCollum became only the second woman elected to Congress from Minnesota since it became a state in 1858. Congresswoman McCollum has pursued legislative priorities focusing on education, global health, and human rights from her positions on both the Education and Workforce Committee and the International Relations Committee.

Betty Louise McCollum was born on July 12, 1954, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and grew up in South St. Paul. She graduated with an associate's degree from Inver Hills Community College in 1980 and, in 1987, earned a B.A. in social studies with a minor in political science from the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul. She worked for 25 years in retail sales along with holding elective office and working as a substitute schoolteacher.

After her daughter, Katie, was seriously injured on a North St. Paul park slide that was not properly maintained, McCollum went to city hall to have the problem fixed. When problems persisted, she decided to take action and ran for city council. She finished in last place, but the experience inspired her to run again and she was elected in 1986. In 1992, McCollum challenged two incumbents in a reapportioned district and won a seat in the Minnesota house of representatives. Her legislative accomplishments included the passage of a school bus safety law and two state constitutional amendments. She compiled a strong environmental record, securing funding for an urban wetlands project and opposing a local utility's efforts to store nuclear waste by the Mississippi River. For six years, McCollum also served as assistant leader of the Democratic Farmer Labor Party Caucus.<sup>1</sup>

In 2000, when longtime U.S. Representative Bruce Vento announced his retirement due to illness, McCollum won the crowded Democratic Farmer Labor Party primary to succeed him in a district that included St. Paul and its surrounding suburbs. In the general election, McCollum championed a progressive agenda: protecting Social Security, creating a Medicare prescription drug benefit for senior

citizens, providing increased federal funding for public schools and colleges, and environmental protection. She favored using federal budget surpluses to pay down debt rather than funding large tax breaks. McCollum prevailed in a three-way race with 48 percent of the vote. In her 2002 and 2004 re-election campaigns, McCollum won with 62 and 58 percent of the vote, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

In the 107th Congress (2001–2003), McCollum's committee assignments included the Education and the Workforce Committee and the Resources Committee. McCollum has become a leading advocate for children in public K-12 schools and a vocal opponent of the George W. Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act, which imposed unfunded mandates on local taxpayers. With more than 20 colleges and universities in her district, McCollum has authored legislation to make higher education more affordable and accessible for students and families.

During the 108th Congress (2003–2005), McCollum brought a Minnesota perspective to U.S. foreign policy, taking a seat on the International Relations Committee. McCollum has been a consistent champion for human rights and increased U.S. support to fight the global HIV/AIDS pandemic. In 2003, the House unanimously agreed to a McCollum resolution condemning sentences of death by stoning, used by fundamentalist Islamic courts against women, as a gross violation of human rights. McCollum also emerged as a leader in Congress on behalf of AIDS orphans, authoring an amendment to direct 10 percent of the funding in the President's \$15 billion HIV/AIDS initiative to AIDS orphans and vulnerable children. In 2005, McCollum cofounded the Global Health Caucus to focus on the challenges of HIV/AIDS and a possible Avian Flu pandemic.

With more than 35,000 Hmong and Lao Americans living in her district, McCollum successfully worked with the Bush administration to extend normal trade relations to Laos, ending nearly 30 years of economic isolation after the Vietnam War. The measure passed the House and Senate and was signed into law by President Bush in December 2004. McCollum also has tended to her district needs, working to secure federal funding for the Central Corridor light rail, the creation of a transit hub at St. Paul's Union Depot, and a \$40 million renovation of the Warren E. Burger Federal Building.

In the 108th and 109th Congresses, McCollum served as a Regional Democratic Whip and also was appointed by Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi of California to a seat on the Democratic Steering Committee.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress*, "Betty McCollum," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Politics in America*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 543; "Betty McCollum," Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/index.html>.